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The call of the bishops

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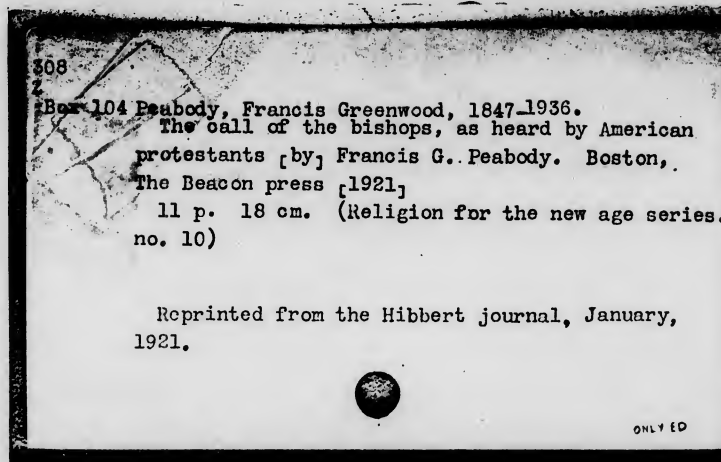
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THE CALL OF THE BISHOPS

AS HEARD BY AMERICAN PROTESTANTS

By

FRANCIS G. PEABODY

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THIS pamphlet deserves the attention of every friend of Christian Unity. It sets forth with equal clearness and goodwill the feelings with which many American Protestants have received the Appeal for a United Christendom, issued by the Lambeth Conference. It describes the convictions and usages of those to whom the appeal is addressed and suggests a "more excellent way."

S. A. E.

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THE CALL OF THE BISHOPS

AS HEARD BY AMERICAN PROTESTANTS.*

By FRANCIS G. PEABODY.

No one can read the solemn "Appeal for a United Christendom," issued by the Lambeth Conference, without recognising the sincerity of its intention and the candor of its declarations. It proposes, with genuine humility and generosity, an "Adventure of Good Will." It confesses the share of the communions under Episcopal authority "in the guilt of crippling the body of Christ" by a "condition of broken fellowship." It approaches the particular problem of recovering the "visible unity of the Church" with full recognition that "the great non-Episcopal Communions" stand for "rich elements of truth, liberty, and life which might otherwise have been obscured or neglected." No note of ecclesiastical arrogance mars this impressive "Call to all Christian People." It should be welcomed as an unprecedented indication of magnanimous and fraternal hope.

When, however, one turns from cordial appreciation of this lofty eloquence and genuine comity to the definitions prescribed for Christian faith, and the remedy proposed for disunion, it becomes the duty of Protestant Christians to express, with not less fraternal candor, the sense of inadequacy, and even of misdirected effort, which this notable document conveys; and it is possible that one who is not asso-

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ciated with any of the "great non-Episcopal Communion," but who has had the privilege of life-long intimacy with many of their leading representatives, may report without prejudice or prepossession the impression which is likely to be made on their minds.

In the first place, the definitions proposed seem inadequate to represent a "genuinely Catholic" Church. Who is a Christian? Christians, affirms this great assemblage of Bishops, are "those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and have been baptised into the name of the Holy Trinity." But is this in reality an adequate description of a disciple of Jesus Christ? Is it not obvious that great numbers of persons, though baptised in infancy and still repeating the great affirmations of the historic creeds, may not be Christians at all? Is a Christian to be known by his external conformity or by the fact that in unconscious infancy he was baptised? Are there not baptised persons who are practically heathen, and unbaptised persons who are Christian saints? All American Christians are at this moment reassured of the vitality of their faith through the unremitting and self-effacing service of the American Quakers in the desolated areas of Europe. Yet not one of these devoted men and women has been baptised. Are they not to be reckoned as members of the "Universal Church of Christ"? Did not the Master whom they serve say of such labors as theirs: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . . Inasmuch as ye have it done unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me?"

The same inadequacy is met when the acceptance of a creed identified with the faith of a Christian. Every reasoning

creature has a creed, but his creed is an intellectual formulation, while his religion is a decision of the will and a direction of the life. A creed is essential to a Christian, but a creed does not create a Christian. The obvious fact is that one might accept almost every article of the historic creeds without thereby pledging himself to the most elementary qualifications of a Christian. To believe that Jesus Christ was miraculously born, that he descended into hell, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, does not forthwith guarantee to the believer the blessing that is promised to the peacemakers or the pure in heart.

A similar impression is made by the enumeration of conditions of unity which occur later in this stately document. These conditions are described as "the whole-hearted acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as the record of God's revelation of Himself to men, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith"; of the Nicene Creed as the "sufficient statement of the Christian faith"; of the divinely instituted sacraments of baptism and the Holy Communion; and of a ministry, "possessing the commission of Christ." Here again the Christian Church is described as a form of organisation, with its constitution, its governors, and its authority. Nothing is here of conduct, service, sacrifice, or love. Indeed, nothing is here of faith, in the sense given to that word by Jesus Christ. "Thy faith hath saved thee," he said to many a repentant or responsive life, which knew nothing of the Nicene Creed as a "sufficient statement of the Christian faith." In short, the "whole-hearted acceptance" here proposed is directed to a law, a government, a system, not to repentance, brotherhood, or faith. It is not because such external conformity is meaningless that great numbers of the "non-

Episcopal Communion" have come to subordinate it as a condition of unity, but because the essential nature of the Christian religion is expressed, not in conformity but in consecration, not in ritual but in righteousness, not in creed but in life. A member of the "Universal Church of Christ" belongs, according to this view, to a much larger fellowship than is proposed in the "Call of the Bishops." That fellowship includes, indeed, many of those who regard the creed commonly called Nicene as the sufficient statement of Christian faith, and who have been baptised into the Holy Trinity; but it is a fellowship which is much more inclusive and catholic. A Christian, in this view, is simply a loyal and consistent disciple of the Master. "If any man has not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his," and correspondingly, if any man has that spirit, he is an acceptable member of the Universal Church of Christ, though he be a Nonconformist concerning the Nicene Creed or a Quaker concerning baptism. All this is becoming increasingly plain to the "great non-Episcopal Communion." They are, at every point, breaking the barriers of dogmatic tests, and promoting an inter-Church unity of service, sacrifice, and power. To propose at such a time a plan of unity which appears to despiritualise the tests of discipleship and to define the Christian Church as an organisation, perpetuated by rule, confession, or tactual transmission of authority, seems to suggest a retreat from the more comprehensive movement, already far advanced, toward a unity of spirit which is the only bond of peace.

When one passes from these matters of definition to the practical programme which the Bishops present for "recovering Christian unity," one is again profoundly impressed by the generosity and sincerity of their intention. There opens

before their minds a plain path of mutual conciliation and co-operation, and they point to it with solemn hope as to "a new call for wider service in a reunited Church." As one scrutinises however, more closely, the practical procedure suggested, it proves so illusory that it is difficult to understand how it could have commended itself to men of experience and wisdom as either conciliatory or reasonable. The plan proposed is, in brief, the acceptance of the Episcopate as "the best instrument for maintaining the unity and the continuity of the Church"; the giving of Episcopal ordination to Nonconformist ministers with "that grace which is pledged to the members of the whole body in the Apostolic rite of the laying on of hands"; and on the other side, the acceptance by "Bishops and Clergy of our Communion of a form of commission or recognition which would commend our ministry to their [non-Episcopal] congregations." Concerning the Episcopate as an instrument of efficiency, there is no doubt much to be said; but it should be noticed that it is not the Episcopate as a form of organisation alone which is here commended, but rather that specific type of Episcopate which is, to use the phrase of the Bishop's "possessed" by the Anglican and its affiliated communions. The Methodist Church, for example, numbering approximately seven times as many members in the United States as the Protestant Episcopal Church, is also an Episcopal Communion. Indeed, its bishops have a degree of authority unapproached in the Anglican Communion. Shall Methodist bishops, then, as representing the Episcopate, be accepted as competent to exercise their functions in the Protestant Episcopal Church; or, on the other hand, must they be required to submit themselves for reordination before their ministry is recognised? Is the

Episcopate, that is to say, to be regarded as an "instrument" or as a "possession"? It becomes obvious that no identity of procedure is proposed. Non-Episcopal ministers are to be reordained; Episcopal clergy are "to accept a commission." In the one case the candidate admits his disqualification until a bishop's hands have touched him; in the other case there is an arrangement by mutual consent. The Nonconformist receives a divinely transmitted authority; the Episcopalian receives a neighborly welcome.

It may be urged that the Anglican Episcopate is a matter of sacred principle to its adherents while the practice of non-Episcopal Communion is merely a matter of convenience; so that, as an American theologian has remarked, "the principle of the sacramental and supernatural priesthood is outraged and threatened by any such passing to and fro between the Church and organized schism." This suggestion, however, only indicates how slightly the convictions of the Nonconformist conscience are appreciated or even understood. The Baptist Churches, for example, number not less than six times as many members in the United States as does the Protestant Episcopal Church. They maintain that baptism by immersion, after mature decision and repentance, is the only method of initiation into the Christian Church which conforms to the teaching and practice of Jesus Christ. Here is as definite and sacred a principle as is the authority of the Episcopate to the Anglican Communion, and one which has at least an equal endorsement in the records of the primitive Church. Is it possible, then, that, for the sake of the great cause of unity, certain bishops and clergy of the Anglican connection would offer themselves for baptism by immersion at the hands of their Nonconformist brethren, precisely as

they ask those brethren to accept Episcopal ordination for the same great end? Such a suggestion is sufficient to indicate how the proposal of reordination affects the minds of ministers in the non-Episcopal Communion. Either it is a meaningless rite, to accept which would be a sacrilege, or it is a divinely instituted form whereby its adherents are set quite apart from the main movement of the Protestant Churches. The Protestant Communion hold their ministry to be Scriptural, valid, and justified by its fruits. A proposal of reordination seems to them like a proposal of remarriage. A discrimination between the Church and the sects appears to them not only ungracious but unhistorical. They are not, in their own opinion, sects, cut off from the Church, but members of the one body of Christ; and one cannot say of another, "I have no need of thee." In short, the real issue here raised is not concerned with the Episcopate as an "instrument," but with the Episcopate as transmitting the peculiar sanctity of an Apostolic succession. It is not an issue which is pressed by the "great non-Episcopal Communion." They have their own work to do, and, as the Bishops generously say, "their own God-given means of grace." Some of them, like the Pilgrims and Puritans, abandoned Anglican rule because of dissent from its sacramentalism; others, inheriting other traditions, have always regarded the doctrine of Apostolic succession as of dubious historical authority, and as tending to substitute an external for a spiritual Catholicity. With cordial recognition, then, of the fraternal spirit in which the Anglican Episcopate is commended as the "one means of providing such a ministry" to "those communions which do not possess the Episcopate," and with warm appreciation of the priceless contributions

made to the Christian life through the order and beauty of Anglican administration and worship, it would seem necessary to say that there is not the least possibility of this path to unity being taken by the "great non-Episcopal Communion." What seems to the Bishops an open road confronts the great majority of their Protestant brethren with the sign, "Private way." In fact, the movement of united Protestantism has already advanced a considerable distance in quite another direction, toward a unity of the spirit and a religion of practical discipleship of Jesus Christ; and the question of the transmission of the Episcopate already appears to those who are on the way to this spiritual unity to belong to a past era, when questions of ecclesiastical authority were of real interest, and the world had not been summoned to weightier matters of co-operation, sacrifice, and service.

The Bishops, with great suggestiveness, set at the head of their Appeal the majestic prayer of Jesus recorded in the Fourth Gospel: "That they may all be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee." The Protestant Communion gladly repeat this prayer; but they do not conceive that a unity which is to be in any degree after the pattern of the unity of Jesus with the Father can be a unity of external conformity or organisation. However incomplete that unity may be, it must, at least, be a spiritual communion, a unity of motive and desire, a complete conformity of will which may in some slight, human way, offer a dim reflection of the Divine unity of which their Master spoke.

This vast enterprise of spiritual unity has already become conspicuous and promising throughout the Protestant world, and the tragic experience of war has in an unprecedented degree encouraged a new and genuine fraternalism. If,

therefore, any communion, with its own precious treasures of thought and life, deliberately chooses to stand aside from this great enterprise, and to claim for itself an exclusive authority of tradition and practice, then the march of Protestantism, though sadly obstructed, must proceed, with keen regret but with undiminished determination, on its own "Great adventure of Good Will"; where those who walk in the spirit find themselves moving on converging lines toward the longed-for consummation, when, in God's time, the prayer of their common Master may at last be fulfilled, and "All may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may all be one in us."

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